



eCOMMONS

Loyola University Chicago
Loyola eCommons

History: Faculty Publications and Other Works

Faculty Publications and Other Works by
Department

5-26-2020

Rebecca Yamin & Donna J. Seifert. 2019. The archaeology of prostitution and clandestine pursuits. Gainesville: University Press of Florida; 978-0-8130-5645-6 hardback \$85.

Timothy J. Gilfoyle
Loyola University Chicago, tgilfoy@luc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/history_facpubs



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Author Manuscript

This is a pre-publication author manuscript of the final, published article.

Recommended Citation

Gilfoyle, Timothy J.. Rebecca Yamin & Donna J. Seifert. 2019. The archaeology of prostitution and clandestine pursuits. Gainesville: University Press of Florida; 978-0-8130-5645-6 hardback \$85.. *Antiquity*, 94, 375: 812-814, 2020. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, History: Faculty Publications and Other Works, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2020.68>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications and Other Works by Department at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).
© Antiquity Publications Ltd, 2020.

REBECCA YAMIN AND DONNA J. SEIFERT. 2019. *The Archaeology of Prostitution and Clandestine Pursuits*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida; 978-0-8130-5645-6, hardback, \$85.

Since 1980, historians have documented in ever-greater detail the evolution and subcultures associated with commercial sex across time and space. A subject that was once trivialised in the academic world can now be studied in undergraduate and graduate courses with lengthy and complex syllabi devoted strictly to the history of prostitution. In American archaeology Rebecca Yamin and Donna Seifert have been at the forefront of this movement to move commercial sex from the margins to the centre of scholarly discussion.

The Archaeology of Prostitution and Clandestine Pursuits successfully integrates and synthesises not only three decades of the authors' pathbreaking research, but the equally important archaeological work of more than twenty other archaeologists, too numerous to name here. Yamin and Seifert began their research as employees of John Milner Associates, an architectural firm specializing in historic preservation, and exploited the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 which required federal construction projects to engage in archaeological work. Several of those projects "produced an American archaeology of prostitution" (p. 2). Seifert's work in Washington, DC, Yamin's research in New York, and the work of archaeologists at other sites employed comparative analysis, economic scaling, and ceramic collections in compiling and analysing brothel and other commercial sex assemblages.

Yamin and Seifert identify two significant nineteenth-century American patterns. First, archaeological and documentary evidence of upscale brothels, ranging from Mary Ann Hall's establishment in Washington, DC to an Aliso Street parlour house in Los Angeles, reveal large households whose residents and clients enjoyed fine dining with expensive dishes, choice meat cuts, exotic foods, and champagne. The considerable high-quality glassware reflected the importance of alcohol over food consumption in such high-end houses, although beef, mutton, pork and poultry were also consumed. The importance placed on hygiene, grooming, and physical appearance in parlour houses compared to other nearby dwellings was reflected in the overabundance of perfume bottles, cream and tooth-powder jars, toothbrushes, hairbrushes, soap dishes, washbasins, chamber pots, medicine bottles, syringes, boric acid and Vaseline (the latter items were employed as contraceptives). Brothel collections included twice as many pharmaceutical items—used to treat pain and sexually transmitted diseases—as found in saloons.

These and even less affluent houses enjoyed a higher standard of living than neighbouring working-class households. Artefacts recovered from brothels in Boston, St. Paul, Minnesota, and Five Points in lower Manhattan repeated similar conclusions.

A second pattern originated in the frontier west where commercial sex followed a different evolution and structure because of the economic phases of mining towns. Some archaeological assemblages mimicked establishments in large cities—grooming instruments, hygienic objects, and alcohol glassware. But more often, artefacts and documents revealed that prostitution in the saloons and brothels of the frontier West—Sandpoint, Idaho; Prescott, Arizona; Fargo, North Dakota; Ouray, Colorado—differed from large cities. Sex workers were integrated into the fabric of the American west. They were not only instrumental in the functioning of leisure institutions like saloons, dance halls, and other local businesses, but also organised social welfare services, medical care, and community events. They were part of an emerging world industrial system that was critical “to the formation, development, stability, and identity of the West” (p. 84). Public acceptance resulted in less comparative conflict in the lives of sex workers. In the early stages of settlement, western communities saw minimal segregation of prostitution, greater tolerance, and increasing opportunity for women entrepreneurs.

Yamin and Seifert also document the national and interurban networks that facilitated commercial sex. In Washington, Mary Ann Hall’s sister Lavinia Hall was married to Henry Colton, a New York City brothel keeper. Ellen Starr left one brothel in Baltimore to run a similar establishment in ‘Hooker’s Division’ in Washington. In California, Chris Buckley and Tom Savage moved their brothel enterprises from San Francisco to Los Angeles during the 1890s and subsequent years when the political environment in the former city grew more hostile to commercial sex. The African American Melvina Massey moved from Virginia and ran the Crystal Palace, the most successful brothel in Fargo from 1899 to 1911. Taken together, these examples illustrate the inter-city networks of the nineteenth-century informal and underground economy.

The final two chapters move away from commercial sex and focus on clandestine pursuits that reflect hidden forms of resistance in the nineteenth century. Archaeological sites document workers drinking on the job, convicts escaping penitentiaries, enslaved African Americans fleeing the South, smugglers avoiding taxes, and pirates doing what pirates do.

Clandestine pursuits in spaces intended to remain hidden are even harder to document: scratched messages on windowpanes, concealed shoes, ‘witches bottles’, and altered coins, all placed in the walls of houses intended to chase away spirits. These practices reflect burial practices, beliefs in magic and the supernatural, and even how children’s play and secret spaces are a “universal feature of childhood” (p. 139).

Yamin and Seifert emphasise the individual agency of their subjects. While subaltern peoples are “without conventional kinds of social and economic power” and not “completely free to choose,” they retain certain amounts of agency (p. 12). The influence of Oscar Lewis, Pierre Bourdieu, Ian Hodder, Judith Butler, and other social theorists is evident throughout, as the authors argue that “archaeology has special access to defiant behavior” (p. 151).

The authors nevertheless openly struggle with how to evaluate the limitations of agency. Yamin and Seifert conclude by moving beyond archaeology. They first engage the turn-of-the-twentieth-century conflict between ‘regulationists’ (proponents of legalisation and regulation of prostitution) and advocates of ‘social purity’ (promoting criminalisation of all forms of commercial sex), and then current debates between decriminalisation proponents and others contending that most forms of commercial sex represent trafficking. The authors argue that “prostitution is a special case” (p. 144), a form of labour in which “the work erodes the soul” (p. 149). “It is difficult for us, . . . the female authors of this book, to talk about prostitution without passing judgment, not on the women who have had to sell sex to make ends meet, but on the social systems that make sex a saleable commodity” (p. 149). They acknowledge that prostitution in the nineteenth century may have been different, but ultimately rely upon twenty-first-century memoirs to insist that commercial sex “is not an issue that has gone away. We are not for decriminalization” (p. 149). Some will criticise Yamin and Seifert for moving beyond the nineteenth-century evidence in reaching such a conclusion, but the authors, in the end, deserve credit for their willingness to take risks.

TIMOTHY J. GILFOYLE
Department of History,
Loyola University Chicago
USA
(Email: tgilfoy@luc.edu)